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Exploring the Potential of Assessment Efficacy in Sports Coaching:

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a thorny issue. In recent years, many of us have witnessed – or been participants in – moves towards more widespread and frequent formalised assessment of not only our professional lives, but our personal lives too. This has taken the form of, for example, increased formal academic testing of schoolchildren, expanding initial and ongoing accreditation across many professions and vocations, and widespread monitoring as part of routine public healthcare. Some argue that increased use of formalised assessment is necessary to ensure accountability, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, maintenance or improvement of standards, or perhaps to identify ‘talent’. This argument currently looms large in public discourse and political rhetoric. Others counter that excessive formal assessment distracts from the core processes of learning and development, encourages an outcome focus (leading to a ‘teach to the test’ ethos), creates unnecessary and unhealthy pressure and stress, and ultimately results in an acquisitive rather than inquisitive learning culture where education comes to be more about satisfying external ‘benchmarks’ than achieving personal development or transformation. This counter argument is often marginalised – whispered in conversations between concerned practitioners or cautiously broached by social scientists in academic publications.

BETTER WAYS TO ASSESS

It is within this wider cultural context that Peter Hay, Sue Dickens, Bob Crudgington and Craig Engstrom share their exploration of the potential of assessment efficacy in sports coaching, which considers the contribution a particular assessment practice might make to “the development and ongoing learning of coaches, as well as to the quality and consequences of the coaching act itself” (p. 187). Although I am sceptical of the wisdom of introducing *further* assessment at a time when assessment already seems to be everywhere, I do share the authors’ perspective that there may be *better* ways to assess – particularly in light of their observation that evidence for a correlation between coaching certification and coaching competency is scarce. In this context at least, it seems some of our current approaches to assessment might beneficially be replaced with the kinds of alternative the authors propose.

ASSESSMENT AS LEARNING

On my reading, the nub of the issue seems to be the need for, in the authors’ terms, *authentic*

assessment which “pursues tasks and foci that are meaningful to the learners and relevant to the contexts in which the knowledge and skills are used” (p. 191). Critical, then, is the relationship that the lived experience of day-to-day coaching practice demonstrates towards the ‘whats’ (content) and ‘hows’ (methods) of assessment. When this relationship is close, the authors reasonably propose, *assessment as learning* is likely to follow and assessment becomes a valuable and integral component of learning as opposed to a ‘bolt on’ extra. Thus: assessment stimulates learning which is grounded in practice.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

A recurrent problem concerning learning from practice, however, is the tendency for critical incidents in practice to occur ‘in a flash’ and therefore escape or elude our attention (which is necessarily targeted towards the task itself). Put another way, many of the lessons that might be taken from a particular incident are only available afterwards through reflective processes. As Mark Freeman¹ has observed, “human existence frequently involves a *delay*, or ‘postponement,’ of insight into its affairs: realizations, narrative connections, are made after-the-fact, when the dust has settled” (p. 136). A key question, then, is how might this kind of critical ‘after the fact’ reflective process be facilitated and supported in coaching scenarios?

AUTHENTICITY OF PRACTICE

The authors’ proposed eCAPS protocol provides one possible solution which allows both assessment and learning to be firmly grounded in the individual coach’s lived experience of practice. This in itself is a fascinating and promising possibility. The eCAPS method, it would appear, offers numerous possibilities, not least the valuable opportunity to consider and assess coaching in a visual, physical and spatial manner which recognises the embodied nature of coaching practice. Its potential is greatly expanded by including real-time learner-instructor interactions which provide the possibility of dialogue and supported reflection to challenge and extend thinking. These promising possibilities aside, there is one question I would raise in response to the authors’ description of the eCAPS system. That is, to what extent does the need to *video* (i.e., film) an individual’s practice require advance planning which creates a ‘special’ – and thereby potentially artificial – coaching scenario?

This question stems from a desire to in some way document ‘authentic’ practice. While the notion of authenticity is in itself problematic and complex, I share the authors’ ambition to find ways to make routine day-to-day practice amenable to closer inspection. Perhaps the proliferation of (and our familiarity with) modern-day video devices mean impromptu filming can in fact be done ‘off the cuff’ without interfering with or disrupting authentic practice? Even if this is the case, however, it seems likely that some critical moments – with learning potential – will fail to be captured in this way, and thereby escape documentation.

STORY-BASED APPROACHES

An alternative or perhaps complementary approach might be the retrospective preparation of story fragments or vignettes which aim to ‘recreate’ a previous incident which the practitioner found to be significant in some way. Phil Jones^{2,3} provides examples of a process where drama therapists wrote a short vignette about a particular moment in their practice which formed the basis of an active dialogue which sought to analyse, unpack, interpret, and learn from the events that the vignette documented. Here, reciprocal learning takes place through a process of co-analysis or co-reflection with the practitioner an active agent in this process. Here again, the focus of the learning is closely tied to the day-to-day practice of the

individual learner.

In my work with Kitrina Douglas, we have used similar approaches which rely on story-based forms of writing to recreate a particular moment from our own or another's lived experience or practice. Sharing the story subsequently in an individual or group environment – and then engaging in dialogue and reflection on the issues it raises – has proved to be a powerful way to stimulate reflection and learning among coaches⁴, sport and exercise science students⁵, and physiotherapy and occupational therapy students⁶. We have found that these approaches are well suited to stimulating critical reflection which, once again, is firmly grounded in 'real life' scenarios and/or day-to-day practice. Like Hay and colleagues' eCAPS system, this kind of approach also has the potential to support autonomous, life-long learning and development through encouraging the individual practitioner to become an active agent in the reflective process. Like the eCAPS method, might this kind of approach also be beneficially incorporated as a component of efficacious assessment?

CONCLUSION

Formalised assessment, for better or for worse, in coaching and beyond, seems to be here to stay (for the foreseeable future at least). The pressing question at this time, then, is how to create and utilise assessment protocols and methods which emphasise personally meaningful and useful development or learning over and above satisfying abstract benchmarks or outcomes which have little to do with one's day-to-day practice. In this light, the authors' proposals – alongside, perhaps, the story-based approaches I have briefly outlined here – hold much potential.

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